U.S. Politics Fall 2014 Prelim exam

Directions: You must choose three of these sections and write on one question from each. You are expected to support your arguments with adequate citations to appropriate literature, but you are reminded to respond to the questions that are asked. Please be aware that your exam is evaluated both on the quality of the individual answers as well as on its overall quality. Use of the same material to answer several different questions is one sign of weakness in that regard and it may result in a failure in the overall evaluation even though each individual question is considered to be satisfactory. Please limit your answers to approximately 2500 words per question, not including bibliography.

Please have exam in by 5pm Tuesday and completed bibliography within 48 hours of exam.

I. General Questions

2. Much of the current debate on American politics deals with the impact of growing economic inequalities on American democracy. Clarify that debate and discuss the academic literature that most effectively addresses it.

3. Linkage institutions play an important role in American politics. Choose two linkage institutions and assess their importance to the political system. Explain how these institutions can foster, as well as dampen representation. Do these linkage institutions present a problem for a representative democracy?

II. Institutions
1. The goals of political actors, and the ways in which their actions and behaviors in pursuit of those goals shape the operation of American government, are recurring themes of the literature on American politics. Describe and discuss/critique the goals scholars have imputed to different political actors (Pick two of the following: members of Congress, presidents, Supreme Court justices), how those actors’ strategies and tactics are shaped by their goals, the ways in which American political institutions shape and constrain these actors’ goals (and their pursuit of them), and the implications of this work for our understanding of the functioning of American government, especially vis-à-vis democratic principles.

2. Use the literature to support or refute the following statement “Presidential power is an illusion in the absence of party control of at least one chamber of Congress.”

3. In 1974 David Mayhew wrote an extended essay – Congress: The Electoral Connection – that greatly affected congressional scholarship over the past forty years. Congress has changed mightily in these forty years, moving from an institution where parties were not especially relevant to one in which they define almost all political action, or lack thereof. Your job is to assess how Mayhew’s perspective has fared over the past 40 years. Brining in research on
congressional elections, ideology, partisanship, and polarization, assess the explanatory power of Mayhew’s core arguments.

III. Political Behavior and Elections
1. Describe how and why individuals’ demographic characteristics, such as their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class or religious identification, shape the political behavior among citizens. For average citizens, do various demographic characteristics function in similar ways (e.g., does race matter in the same way that gender matters?) or do they matter in different ways and for different reasons? How do these characteristics interact? Further, what does the evidence tell us about the influence of demographic characteristics on the behavior of political elites? Should we expect to find the same effects of demographic characteristics among elite actors as we do among the masses?

2. Most of the seminal studies of voter participation begin with the premise that voters participate less than they did in the past. Recent presidential elections, however, reveal a strong reversal in these trends. Describe and assess the major theories of voter participation. Are they able to explain the recent resurgence in voter turnout? If not, how might one explain recent participation increases in national level elections?

3. Perhaps the most influential research in political behavior appeared many years ago (1964), The Nature of Beliefs Systems in the Mass Public by Philip Converse. Why was this piece so important? Discuss the influence of Converse’s classic work on subsequent work in the field of political behavior. Finally, compare Converse’s work to the contemporary classic written by Zaller and Feldman (1992), A Simple Theory of Survey Response…” How does the more recent work answer some of the more troubling questions posed by Converse?

IV. Political Parties and Organized Interests
1. Party identification is one of the central concepts in the literature on American political behavior. There are multiple theories about what party identification is, how it develops, and its role in the process of attitude formation and electoral choice. Discuss and critically evaluate these competing theories. Does the empirical evidence support one theoretical perspective more than the others?

2. Recent polls suggest that the percentage of independents in the populace is higher than in decades. Yet the notion that the parties are stronger than ever is ubiquitous. Explain these conflicting perspectives.

3. Is there anything new to understand about why people join interest groups?

4. Survey evidence in the past three decades indicates that ideologues have sorted themselves by party. What are the implications of this sorting for American politics?

5. Why do organized interests lobby the government? What do they get for their efforts? Much literature tells us that lobbying doesn’t produce much in the way of results, but many specific studies demonstrate some real pay-off. Can we reconcile these two strands of research? In the end, what compels most large entities to pursue a lobbying strategy, across the whole of American politics?
V. Subnational (State & Local)
1. The study of parties and elections at the national level is a very important component of the intellectual development of the American politics field and remains a featured part of the discipline. But the study of local elections is far less developed? Why is this? Do we need entirely different theories to understand local elections, or are at least some of the most powerful theories about parties and elections at the national level potentially applicable to the study of local elections?

2. Describe the various major lines of work that have made political economy a dominant framework in the study of urban politics in the U.S. What is your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of these differing political economy approaches with respect to the understanding of local-level politics and policymaking in the U.S.?

3. Some of the first research on comparative state politics gave us the idea of political culture as a means for understanding political and policy differences. Does political culture have any remaining utility in the study of comparative state politics?